Knowing our limits can reconnect us with true riches; Register Faith

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Body

These feel like apocalyptic times. Coronavirus has us panicked, apprehensive and fearful. We suddenly feel at the mercy of mysterious powers working beyond us, forces outside our control. Our anxieties about the virus loom against the background of similar fears about climate change. Predictions of doom for the human race and the planet on which we live are routine these days, in a way that would have been hard to imagine in the postwar boom half a century ago, when the future seemed bright.

A few years ago, researching for a book, I read through numerous sermons and commentaries on St Paul's epistles from the 16th century. What stayed with me was the way those readers, in the presence of sickness and death, found solace and comfort in these letters to the early Christians. In the early 16th century the average male died at the age of 47. An estimated 40 per cent of the population did not survive beyond their teenage years, and in cities such as London life expectancy for the poor could be as low as www.25.No wonder the commentaries were permeated with a sense of the fragility of life, the pervasiveness of pain. These texts had a clear resonance with people whose hold on life was tenuous and unpredictable.

We have become used to a sense of our own invulnerability. When we get sick there will always be a pill, a remedy, a course of treatment to make us better. If there is a problem we can quickly invent a solution. If there is something we don't like about ourselves we can go to the gym, adopt a better diet or have an operation. If our economy is struggling we can get a bailout from the bank or the government. We assume we have some kind of right to live to a ripe old age. Yet try asserting your rights to a plague. We are suddenly being forced to face our own mortality.

Yet it was that very confidence in our own technology, our ability to fix or change things, that got us into trouble over the environment. We are destroying the planet because we thought that we could consume its resources with impunity and pump greenhouse gases into the atmosphere without it making a difference. It was a bout of hubris, thinking we could mess around with the deep structures and rhythms of the Earth without consequences. We thought we could live without limits, with endless economic growth and what the American novelist and philosopher Wendell Berry calls the "technology of infinity".

An ancient Hebrew poet once wrote: "Teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts to wisdom." Coronavirus is an enemy of the human race and we should work and pray with all the medical wisdom and expertise we can throw at it. Ultimately we trust that this storm will pass, but in the meantime maybe it can teach us some wisdom. Temporary social distancing can remind us how much we need our neighbours to look out for us as we need to look out for them. Self-isolation, with no sport to watch, no colleagues to chat to, nothing to fill the long hours, can mean we start phoning or writing to friends we haven't spoken to for ages, learn to play an instrument, try out longer and deeper conversations with family or flatmates. It can give us urgency to find new ways to reach out to friends and neighbours. It could teach us habits of quiet prayer or mindfulness, gratitude for what we do have but temporarily miss, reflection on our lives and what really matters, appreciation for the simple things of life. After a few months it could even teach us a whole new way of life, with less travel, more conversation, stronger connection with neighbours, knowing our place in the world.

This crisis can act as a reminder of our simple createdness, our limits and our mortality. It can impress upon us that we receive life and the planet we live on not as a right but as a gift. Rediscovering our fragility is not the whole of human wisdom, but it might just be the beginning.

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